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SUBJECT: MEDIA REACTION: RECALL OF PRESIDENT CHEN SHUI-BIAN

¶1. Summary: President Chen Shui-bian's two-hour televised "report to the people" Tuesday evening was the front-page headline story of all major Chinese-language Taiwan dailies June 21. All papers also devoted their first few pages to detailing Chen's refutations of the accusations that led to the recall motion by the pan-Blue alliance. The pro-independence "Liberty Times," Taiwan's biggest daily, front-paged "Bian Refutes Each of Ten Major Reasons for Recall," and ran a banner headline on page two that said "Someone Wants to Pull the Trigger ... Bian: I Am Willing to Sacrifice for Taiwan." Several papers also reported that the Taiwan stock market took a dive Tuesday of 219 points, due to local political confrontation.

¶2. Almost all newspapers editorialized on Chen's speech Tuesday evening. A "Liberty Times" editorial criticized the pan-Blue leadership for seeking to usurp power at the expense of pan-Blue legislators. Editorials in the limited-circulation, pro-independence, English-language "Taipei Times" and "Taiwan News" both appealed to the judiciary to uncover the truth regarding the corruption scandals. An editorial in the mass-circulation "Apple Daily," however, pointed out two major flaws of Chen's self-defense. An editorial in the pro-status quo "China Times" said that during Chen's two-hour speech, people only heard him argue his points and deny accusations against him in a clever and sophisticated way, but they didn't hear him reflect on or review his behavior. An editorial in the pro-unification "United Daily News" called Chen's speech a political monologue that deceived himself and others. An editorial in the limited-circulation, conservative, pro-unification, English-language "China Post" said Chen's speech failed to defuse his crisis. End summary.

A) "Ma and Soong Usurp Power at Expense of Pan-Blue Legislators"

The pro-independence "Liberty Times" [circulation: 600,000] editorialized (6/21):

"... The pan-Blue leaders are free to act at their own discretion and accuse [President Chen] in an attempt to use the recall or no-confidence motions to cover up their aggressive usurpation of power. But still, the whole process must be carried out carefully in accordance with the Constitution. Judged from this perspective, it is very easy to tell that even though the so-called recall or no-confidence motion may possibly be part of the pan-Blue leaders' scheme to usurp power, it will not only result in political upheavals unwelcome to the public but will also sacrifice those pan-Blue legislators who serve as foot soldiers. This is an issue that these legislators must face seriously before they start acting belligerently in the Legislative Yuan."

B) "While Silence Is Not Gold"

The pro-independence, English-language "Taipei Times" [circulation:

30,000] editorialized (6/21):

"The pan-blue camp's motion to recall President Chen Shui-bian will be put to a vote next Tuesday. This campaign is unprecedented in the history of Taiwan. The pan-blue camp continues to hold public hearings on the presidential recall in the legislature, while Chen continues to resist calls to respond to the legislature, including in a national address on television last night. The forces for and against the recall are moving in two parallel lines, finding no common ground nor resolution to the conflict. ... But Chen's refusal to clarify in detail the widely debated allegations of the first family's involvement in corruption scandals is less than what the public expected from the president. Those allegations are the focus of the pan-blue camp's attacks, as well as media interest and public concern. They involve the first family, and apart from Chen himself, no one else can clear up these allegations.

"If Chen remains quiet, the pan-blue camp and media will continue their reckless and uninhibited muckraking, and the asymmetric information and allegations against the first family will continue to flow freely, while the truth will remain lost in the political labyrinth of hard-to-define truths and untruths. Chen's report to the public may have helped consolidate core supporters against the recall motion, but it will not do much to restore public confidence in the president. The bribery and corruption cases are now under official investigation. But with the legislative vote scheduled for next week, the judiciary's findings will come too late. Since there is not enough time to unearth the truth, both the DPP and the opposition will have to rely on political means such as their legislative clout or launch demonstrations in support of or against Chen. Politicians do not treat the truth with respect, nor is their ability to review their own actions improving. And that is the real threat to Taiwan's democracy."

C) "All Must Respect Judicial Independence"

The pro-independence, English-language "Taiwan News" [circulation: 20,000] noted in an editorial (6/21):

"The current controversy over the allegations of scandal and corruption in the extended first family or close aides of President Chen Shui-bian and the recall drive launched by the conservative 'pan-blue' opposition camp has offered an excellent chance for our citizens to observe the degree of genuine respect of our leading politicians and political parties for the core values of democratic constitutional politics, judicial independence and human rights. ...

On the one hand, the outbreak of this set of scandals is certainly shocking and damaging to the reputation of the president and the DPP. On the other hand, we believe that the fact that the president has not stood in the way of the detention, and possible indictment, of his son-in-law stands in stark contrast to the former authoritarian KMT regime and demonstrates the progress made in democratization during the past two decades."

D) "President Argues Obstinate While Pan-Blue Camp Acts Foolishly"

The mass-circulation "Apple Daily" [circulation: 500,000] editorialized (6/21):

"... But President Chen has shown two major flaws during his defense, which made his arguments unconvincing. First, while seeking to clarify all the corruption scandals, Chen merely said in a resolute tone that he and his wife have never been involved in any of the scandals, without offering any reasonable details. ... Second, while seeking to rebut the political 'accusations,' such as his causing cross-Strait tensions, diplomatic defeats, provoking ethnic confrontation, and suppressing freedom of the press, Chen cited many similar mistakes made during the old KMT regime in defending himself. Such a defense may be convincing, but we are living in a different age now, and one should not use behavior under a totalitarian era to justify mistakes made during a democratic age. ..."

E) "Our Great President Chen, We Have All Blamed You Unjustly"

The pro-status quo "China Times" [circulation: 400,000] commented in an editorial (6/21):

"Having listened to President Chen's 'Report to the People,' we only felt one thing: The person we listened to was Lawyer Chen, who was defending himself using fine words, or Legislator Chen, who was involved in severe interrogation. But we did not see President Chen 'reporting to the people.' During his talk, for two whole hours, we only heard [Chen] argue his point and deny [any accusations] in a clever and sophisticated way; he neither reflected on nor reviewed [his behavior]. ...

"We need a president who listens to the voices of his people, not one who unilaterally cries out to his people. We need a president with whom we can engage in a dialogue, not one who tries to ignite people's emotions using populism. We need a president who faces doubts against him with a modest and open-minded attitude and who honestly explains the facts to his people, not one who cannot tell right from wrong and who tries to argue obstinately using various kinds of excuses. Chen's 'Report to the People' made us see the part that is the last thing we expect from him."

F) "Report to the People: A Political Monologue That Deceives Chen and Others"

The pro-unification "United Daily News" [circulation: 400,000] said in an editorial (6/21):

"... As of yesterday evening, the performances by Chen Shui-bian and the DPP in response to the recall motion have done nothing at all to help clarify the truth. [Chen's defense] failed to get him out of the corruption scandals; instead, it has all the more deconstructed and sowed discord in society. This 'Report to the People' was indeed a monologue that 'deceived Chen and others!' Chen said: Please pull the trigger (against me) then! A president who has led his country into disasters has turned out to be a victim, and a president who lacks a moral grounding and fails to govern his country appropriately has suddenly become a political saint. ..."

G) "Chen's Report to People Won't Help Defuse Crisis"

The conservative, pro-unification, English-language "China Post" [circulation: 30,000] wrote in an editorial (6/21):

"The decision by President Chen Shui-bian to deliver a televised report directly to the people yesterday in his first formal response to a legislative motion to recall him - instead of testifying before the lawmaking body, as constitutionally demanded - deserves condemnation by the opposition and the general public for his contempt for parliament and violating the rules of democracy. ... The way Chen dealt with the legislative move by the Kuomintang (KMT) and the People First Party (PFP) to oust him not only demonstrated a lack of wisdom, but once again proved that he is a politician who will do anything if it can help him ride out a difficulty, caring little about moral principles. ...

"This attitude suggests that the president is still unwilling to honestly face the people and to come clean about the controversies surrounding the many alleged wrongdoings by the people around him. ... In the event of a failure to push through the recall bill and have it voted on later by the people in a referendum, the best alternative to increase pressure on Chen is to launch a no-confidence vote against his premier, Su Tseng-chang. ... Many in the public may be concerned that a round of sustained contests waged by the opposition against Chen will inevitably lead to political tensions, but allowing a president lacking the will to end corruption and having proved incapable of leading the country to continue to perform his role could prove to be more dangerous."

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